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Abstract

*Truth, history and transformation in the work of Richard Flanagan, Julie Gough,
Anne Ferran and Henry Savery*

This paper discusses the ways contemporary art strategies can transform our understanding of history and create new ways of engaging with the past. Referencing two Tasmanian novels that raise issues about truth, history and transformation, it compares the ways in which two contemporary Australian artists explore history and cultural heritage. Julie Gough seeks to re-evaluate the impact of the past on the present through the obsessive collection and manipulation of found objects and natural materials, especially those associated with her Tasmanian Aboriginal ancestry. Anne Ferran works with the residues of Australia's colonial past using photomedia, video and installation, often reconstructing the untold stories of women at historic sites such as the female factories at Ross and South Hobart. While the strategies used by both artists differ, their work reflects a common concern for reconfiguring and redescribing the past in ways that question the authority and veracity of official recorded history. Gough's and Ferran's work is discussed with reference to two novels that merge fact with fiction: Richard Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish*, a contemporary Australian novel set on the Sarah Island penal settlement, and Henry Savery's *Quintus Servinton*, Australia's first novel, which relates the author's life and transportation to colonial Australia. The paper arose as a result of the author creating an art work about Henry Savery for the 2008 Ten Days on the Island Festival exhibition, *The Port Arthur Project*.

*Truth, history and transformation in the work of Richard Flanagan, Julie Gough,
Anne Ferran and Henry Savery*

*To be honest, I have come to the conclusion that there is not much in this life that
one can be sure about.*

Richard Flanagan, *Gould's book of fish*.¹

The idea for this paper arose when I created an art work about Henry Savery, Australia's first novelist, for the 2008 Ten Days on the Island Festival exhibition, *The Port Arthur Project*. I made a two part installation that aimed to metaphorically release Savery from the bindings of his tragic past. The first part was a performance in Port Arthur's Separate Prison Chapel, in which I repeatedly wrote the words *The truth shall make you free* (John 8:32) over the pages of a 1962 edition of Savery's largely autobiographical novel, *Qunitus Servinton*, while sitting at a lead covered table. An accompanying installation was sited on the Isle of the Dead, in front of Savery's memorial. It consisted of lead text buried into the ground, that also spelled out the words *The truth shall make you free*. As a result of making this work, reading Savery's novel and thinking about his life, I began to think about the way in which some contemporary artists focus on reinterpreting the past and encourage us to transform our understanding of history. My thoughts also turned to Richard Flanagan's *Gould's book of fish*, a contemporary novel that interrogates the concepts of truth and history through the genre of magic realism. The connections I make between the work of Anne Ferran, Julie Gough, Richard Flanagan and Henry Savery, are very much the observations of an artist inspired by literature.

* * *

In Richard Flanagan's *Gould's book of Fish*, Billy Gould - liar, artist, forger and con-man - is imprisoned on remote Sarah Island in the mid 1820s for theft, insubordination and mockery of the crown. There he is ordered to paint, amongst other things, a book of fish.

¹ Flanagan, Richard, *Gould's Book of fish*. Sydney: Pan MacMillan Australia, 2001, p 4

One evening, as he digs about in his cell, the roof collapses in on him and he discovers to his amazement that he is directly beneath the prison archives. Night after night, he burrows his way into the room above and reads the official prison records. As he reads, he discovers, to his horror, that the records are complete fabrications of the truth.



*The world, as described by Jorgen Jorgensen in those blue-inked pages, was at war with the reality in which we lived. The bad news was that reality was losing. It was unrecognisable. It was insufferable. It was, in the end, inhuman...*²

Billy decides that he has to do something about this. In an act of madness, he escapes from the prison and take the records with him, dragging them on a huge sled through the rugged wilderness of South-West Tasmania. He is determined to show that the written word has unjustly represented reality and he wants to put the records in the hands of bushranger Matt Brady, who he thinks has the power to expose the lies to the authorities.

² Ibid, p 285

*...it became my life's most sacred desire to expose that the Word & the World were no longer what they seemed, they were no longer One, says Billy.*³

But Billy's aim of exposing the false records is never realised – instead, they become the fuel for the funeral pyre of a black tracker. His precious book of fish is also destroyed along with the records, and Billy is captured and sentenced to death. As he waits to be hung, noose around his neck, he is unexpectedly shot and falls from the jetty into the sea where he is transformed into a weedy sea dragon.



William Buelow Gould, *Weedy Seadragon*, c1832

The book of fish is a story about truth and transformation, about the unreliability of history and the power of the word to construct and reconstruct who we are and how we think about ourselves. This paper will establish links between two novels and the work of two artists that address these themes in quite different but interconnected ways. Richard Flanagan writes about crazy Billy Gould, the tenuous nature of truth and the circularity of history. Julie Gough seeks to re-evaluate the impact of the past on the present through the obsessive collection and manipulation of found objects and natural materials, especially those associated with her Tasmanian Aboriginal ancestry. And Anne Ferran works with the residues of Australia's colonial past using photomedia, video and installation, often reconstructing the untold stories of women at historic sites such as the female factories at Ross and South Hobart. Finally, there is Henry Savery, Australia's first novelist, who

³ Ibid, p 309

provides a direct link to the colonial past that Ferran and Gough seek to redescribe and in which Billy Gould transforms from man to fish. Savery's novel, *Quintus Servinton*, merges fact with fiction to retell the story of the author's life and fall from grace through forgery. Like the *Book of fish*, it is a cautionary tale.

But let's return to the *Book of fish* for a moment, to what is perhaps the most powerful image in the story – that of Billy Gould, deep in the Tasmanian wilderness, hauling behind him a huge sled of precariously stacked prison records.

*The terrain was densely, at times even impenetrably, forested by primeval trees & ferns. It rose in great wild waves of mountains, it fell in the harshest cataracts, glistening white as granite.*⁴



Frenchman's Cap, Southwest Tasmania, wood engraving, Picturesque Atlas of Australasia, 1886

The vision is both powerful and poignant. It is about a dogged determination in the face of what can only be certain failure. Even if Matt Brady reads the records, accepts they are lies and tries to expose them to the authorities, who would believe the mad claims of a

⁴ Ibid, p 314

bushranger and a criminal? Billy Gould's plan is both 'fantastick' and completely insane, requiring extremes of both physical and mental strength. It is madness laced with hope.

*I was hauling a sled of lies called history through a wilderness. Time laughed.*⁵

And then there is the image of the destroyed records, which evokes not only the idea of the loss of history, but the endless task of rewriting it - of trying to retell the truth, whatever that may be.

The tenuous relationship between truth and history that Flanagan so powerfully evokes in his novel is discussed by Nicholas Shakespeare in his essay *Remembering and forgetting*. Shakespeare argues that in order to understand history better, we need to merge the skills of historian and novelist. He states:

*History needs to forget as much as fiction needs to remember and in that intersection there should be ample space to build an open house – a monument, if you like – of competing narratives.*⁶

Shakespeare's ideas are reinforced by the views of Richard Rorty, a philosopher who privileges narrative over theory and contends that the only way we can come to terms with the slippery concept of truth is through a different approach to and, understanding of language:

*But if we could ever become reconciled to the idea that most of reality is indifferent to our descriptions of it, and that the human self is created by the use of vocabulary rather than being adequately or inadequately expressed in a vocabulary, then we should at last have assimilated what was true in the Romantic idea that truth is made rather than found. What is true about this claim is just that **languages** are made rather than found, and that truth is a property of linguistic entities, of sentences.*⁷

⁵ Ibid, p 322

⁶ Shakespeare, Nicholas, 'Remembering and forgetting', in Lake, Marilyn (ed) *Memory, monuments and museums: the past in the present*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2006, p 37- 40

⁷ Rorty, Richard, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, ©1989, p 7

So Rorty tells us that the truth is not out there. It is a construct rather than a reality – a construct of *language*. He thus argues that it is through language itself that we are able to endlessly recreate truth and thus meaning for ourselves. Rorty believes that narrative fiction, poetry and irony are tools that enable us to retell, redescribe and reinvent ourselves and our histories, over and over again. Thus fiction, rather than philosophy, becomes the most powerful means for understanding the nature of humanity and the world.⁸ As stories are told and retold, meaning becomes a network of endless possibilities. There is no closure, only the continual redescribing of the self and the world.⁹ As Billy Gould tells us:

*Stories are progressive, sentence must build upon sentence as brick upon brick, yet the beauty of this life in its endless mystery is circular. Sun & moon, spheres endlessly circling. Black man, full circle; white man, bisected circle; life, the third circle, on & on, & round & round.*¹⁰

This redescription of the world – of our understanding of history and our role within it - is also powerfully achieved through the strategies employed by visual artists. Julie Gough and Anne Ferran have developed visual languages that invite us to question our relationship to history and to truth.

Julie is an obsessive collector: shells, birds, postcards, green things, kitchen tools, souvenirs from the 1950s, kelp, cuttlefish, sticks of tea-tree, books with the word black in the title. She is drawn most particularly to those things associated with her Tasmanian Aboriginal ancestry and uses them to create new artefacts as a way of trying to understand and engage with that heritage. She says:

Much of my work is about collecting, compiling and reconfiguring objects of culture. I need to gather, shuffle and prod objects about. My process is to find the

⁸ Shusterman, Richard, www.press.jhu.edu/books/hopkins_guide_to_literary_theory/, viewed on 23/03/04.

⁹ Ozolins, Brigita, *Searching for the subject: new narratives through installation*. (PhD exegesis). Hobart, Tasmania: University of Tasmania, 2004, p 75

¹⁰ Flanagan, Richard, *Gould's Book of fish*. Sydney: Pan MacMillan Australia, 2001, p 352

*point of unease – where familiarity counters a general discomfort and leaves the work hovering between uncertain worlds.*¹¹

And so Gough represents the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery's diorama of an Aboriginal family sitting around a campfire. She displays it between curtains decorated with kitsch gnomes to challenge this portrayal of Aboriginal life by the State's official repository of culture. Entitled *Folklore*, the work literally draws the curtains on the paradoxical links between high and low culture. Or in *The trouble with Rolf*, Gough reinvents the musical notation for Rolf Harris's song, *Tie me kangaroo down sport*, to expose a lyrical arrangement in which Aborigines are referred to in the same breath as Australian fauna, to be 'let loose' at the whim of a stockman. Or in *Imperial Leather*, she casts her own soap on a rope into caricatures of an Australian Aborigine and hangs them on a Union Jack made from blood red towelling.



Julie Gough, *Imperial Leather*, 1994, Cotton, wax, masonite, 149 x 204 x 15 cm
Collection of the National Gallery of Victoria

Gough explains that the only way she can work with the imagery, text and inferences of the materials and objects that are already 'out there', performing their roles in society, is to claim them back and reuse them subversively:

¹¹ Gough, Julie, *Gough_Art_1994-2006.ppt*, PowerPoint of artist's work supplied to author on CD, February 2007: Artist's statement about *Shadow of the Spear*, 1996

*I then redirect their power to damage and undermine, into new performative roles which can question the past and redefine our understanding of our Country's past, present and potential future.*¹²

As well as collecting existing artefacts and reconfiguring them, Julie also creates her own, based on those recorded by official history or collected by museums or inspired by her own experience of spending time on the north-east coast of Tasmania. Her oversized necklaces are crafted from abalone shells, pumice stone, driftwood or beach coal. They are familiar yet strange, clunky yet beautiful - weird decorative objects that evoke a primordial relationship to the land and the sea, that take us back to a time where history is inscribed within objects rather than with words.



Julie Gough, Drift, 2005, Driftwood, nylon, 130 x 90 x 20 cm
Collection of National Gallery of Victoria

I like to think about what it means for me to make necklaces that are bigger-than-me; that are not necessarily beautiful and not clearly necklaces either ... I ask, is the traditional Tasmanian Aboriginal shell necklace today a carefully maintained sign of cultural continuity, connectivity, authenticity and authority and if so is this

¹² Ibid, artist's statement about *The trouble with Rolf*, 1996

*different to what it represented 200 years + ago? My answer is that I can't know what it once was and provided outside of my own time and perspective.*¹³

These necklaces have magical properties for Julie. They are 'life-preservers' and 'memory retainers' that become symbolic emergency vehicles for bringing her home.

*My sense is that if I drowned with these around me it would be in the arms of the sea and the maker of all necklaces ...*¹⁴

But the necklaces are not enough. In a greater determination to return to a lost past, Gough makes rafts from cuttlefish, driftwood, rope, plastic, timber and shells, and launches them into the sea, trying to navigate back to a place she herself acknowledges she can never quite reach, a time and place she can't quite locate. While she paddles across the surface of the water, Billy Gould, in contrast, sinks into the depths beneath it, and is transformed, symbolically, into a fish. And while Gough continues to paddle in the hope of finding the right direction, Billy, now a weedy sea dragon, is unable to reconcile himself to the world in which he lives.



Julie Gough, *Craft for floating home (coconuts)*, 2005, Coconuts, driftwood, rope, plastic, timber, shells
c40 x 80 x 150 cm (h x w x d)

*I wished to be & I was not & so I tried to rewrite this world as a book of fish & set it to rights in the only manner I knew how.*¹⁵

¹³ Ibid, artist's statement: *Some commentary about the necklace works: Drift, Seam, Lifebearer and Raft and Transmitting Device in my solo exhibition: Intertidal at Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi 10 May – 4 June 2005*

¹⁴ Ibid, 2005

Flanagan uses Billy to show that identity, like truth, is never fixed, and that history, like fiction, can be endlessly retold. And Gough transforms found materials to try to connect with her Aboriginal heritage and come to a deeper understanding of the complex nature of her identity. In both cases, the transformative power of storytelling is demonstrated.

Anne Ferran also invites us to reassess history and engage with lost identities, often working with the residues of Australia's colonial past. While Julie struggles to manage the ever-increasing volume of her collections of objects and artefacts, Anne searches for the hidden, the lesser known and the under-acknowledged. She works with the fragments and minutiae of history, driven by a seemingly persistent longing to provide a link - a small but precarious bridge - between the present and the past.

Ferran's iconic photograms become powerful traces of a fragile history. They evoke both the absent bodies that wore these garments and become memory triggers of the most intimate and mundane of moments through the exposure of stitchery, buttons and worn fabric and thread. Ferran says of these works:

*Every image came as a surprise. It would nearly always reveal some aspect of the garment I hadn't seen before. Details that were invisible to the eye would show up, as if there were a kind of code that passed secretly between cloth and paper.*¹⁶

¹⁵ Flanagan, Richard, *Gould's Book of fish*. Sydney: Pan MacMillan Australia, 2001, p 401

¹⁶ Historic Houses Trust: Art at the properties: *Anne Ferran*

[http://images.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://www.hht.net.au/__data/page/12006/untitled_\(babys_dress\)2.jpg&imgrefurl=http://www.hht.net.au/collections/art_at_the_properties/anne_ferran&h=425&w=292&sz=39&hl=en&start=1&tbnid=NAqi0W1hlahtEM:&tbnh=126&tbnw=87&prev=/images%3Fq%3DAnne%2BFerran%26svnum%3D10%26hl%3Den%26client%3Dsafari%26rls%3Den%26sa%3DG](http://images.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://www.hht.net.au/__data/page/12006/untitled_(babys_dress)2.jpg&imgrefurl=http://www.hht.net.au/collections/art_at_the_properties/anne_ferran&h=425&w=292&sz=39&hl=en&start=1&tbnid=NAqi0W1hlahtEM:&tbnh=126&tbnw=87&prev=/images%3Fq%3DAnne%2BFerran%26svnum%3D10%26hl%3Den%26client%3Dsafari%26rls%3Den%26sa%3DG) (viewed on 17 March, 2007)



Ferran also creates smaller, more intimate bridges between past and present through her artist books. Hand-bound in soft grey felt, her works from the exhibition *Insula*, invite a private, silent engagement with a secret past. Images of women from the Gladesville Asylum, originally taken in 1948 by an unknown photographer, have been reworked through careful cropping and blurring. Some direct our gaze to a simple, poignant gesture – the grasp of a button, the twist of a hand – that becomes the punctum of our fascination with these anonymous women. Others capture a disturbing movement - a vibration that suggests something not only physical but also psychological. It is as if the very thoughts of these women have been momentarily captured and might just slip off the page, dissolved by the daylight if we turn away for too long. These works are subtle engagements with the past. They reveal minor truths about individuals whose lives would ordinarily be overlooked by the grand narratives of history. They are incomplete yet suggestive, leaving us to recreate the absent stories of these women's lives.



Anne Ferran, *Book 2: 1-38*, 2003, from 1-38, Ilfochrome print and 11, 2003 from 1-38, inkjet print

At Ross, the site of a Female Factory that operated for only six years in the midlands of Tasmania, closing in 1854, Ferran took photos of the ground, of hollows and dips and gentle rises that suggest a wearing down of the earth, like floorboards worn thin through constant pacing. She describes the seeming invisibility or insignificance of these works and their relationship to this historic site:

*...if you turn the terms around then the significance is the invisibility—those buildings were allowed to fall into disrepair or to be demolished because their history was painful, and shameful, and people actively wished to forget it. Often it's this kind of historical absence that fuels my work, because I really do believe that the legacies of the past are worked out in the present, whether we are conscious of them or not.*¹⁷



Anne Ferran, *The Ground at Ross*, 2001, from *Lost to Worlds*, gelatin silver prints

¹⁷ Ferran, Anne, *In the ground, on the air*, Sydney College of the Arts, Faculty seminar, 18 May, 2004

As Geoffrey Batchen states, Ferran's practice '*brings history up against itself, up against its own desire to be differentiated from the now*'.¹⁸ Thus Ferran's work does not attempt to recreate the past, but rather, provides a trigger for thinking about that which is absent or concealed. As in Gough's work and *the Book of fish*, Ferran invites us to question the nature of recorded history, to ask about the significance of what has been left out and what has been included. And also like Flanagan and Gough, she directs our attention to the complex nature of identity. There is no complete picture. As the narrator of Billy Gould's story states, '*We – our histories, our souls – are, ... in a process of constant decomposition and reinvention...*'¹⁹

Ferran, Gough and Flanagan are contemporary artists who have revisited the past to better understand the present, but Australia's first novelist, Henry Savery, was a direct witness of colonial history. Like Billy Gould, Savery was a forger and a conman and was in Hobart at the time Billy was sent to Sarah Island. In his novel, *Quintus Servinton*, he tells the story of his own fall from grace and transportation to Australia. There is no transformation of man into fish, pumice stone into magic necklace, or cloth into light, but our first novel does reflect an underlying desire for transformation and redemption:

*It was not wholly a desire of fame ... that led the author to "o'erstep the modesty of nature," and venture to compose a book; but it was the idea that he might convey useful and instructive precepts under their most attractive guise – the force of example.*²⁰

And Savery does this by merging fact with fiction. He tells us that although his story could be called a novel, '*it is no fiction, or work of the imagination, either in characters*

¹⁸ Batchen, Geoffrey, 'History remains: the photographs of Anne Ferran', *Art on Paper*, Jan-Feb, 2000, p 50

¹⁹ Flanagan, Richard, *Gould's book of fish*. Sydney: Pan MacMillan Australia, 2001, p 2

²⁰ Savery, Henry, *Quintus Servinton: a tale founded upon true incidents of real occurrence. Edited with a biographical introduction by Decil H Hadgraft*. Brisbane Queensland: The Jacaranda Press, 1962. Preface, p xxxiii

*or incidents ... nor that it is the mere recital of the events of a man's life – but it is a biography, true in its general features, and in its portraiture of individuals...*²¹

Thus, in this largely autobiographical work, history forgets and fiction remembers as the author plays with the truth to construct a new life-narrative.

As the evidence we have of Savery's life is so sparse, it becomes difficult to maintain a distinction between the life of the author and the life of Quintus, the protagonist of his novel. Both Henry and Quintus forge bills of exchange to save themselves from financial ruin. Both unsuccessfully attempt suicide by drowning and both have their death sentences commuted to transportation. Both earn their tickets of leave, take further financial risks, forge more bills of exchange and attempt suicide for a second time by cutting their throats. But the ultimate tragedy is that while Quintus learns from his errors and is reunited with his wife and child in England to live happily ever after, Henry is sent to Port Arthur, where he spends the final 18 months of his life before dying either from a stroke or suicide.

The author hopes, that by relating his story, others may learn from the failings of his flawed character:

*The mirror of life, as held up to us, by the faults and follies of our neighbours, may always be looked into with advantage; from such as I can present may be learnt, the danger of self-sufficiency, or the over-estimation of one's powers.*²²

But as in the *Book of fish*, *Quintus Servinton* also reflects on the harsh hand of destiny: *We none of us know what is before us, or what we can bear, until we are tried...*²³ This reflection becomes a recurring motif throughout the novel as Quintus encounters one difficulty after another. But like Billy Gould, Quintus is born with an obstinate determination to keep going, no matter what fate doles out to him. He makes error after

²¹ Ibid, p xxxiii

²² Ibid, p xxxix

²³ Ibid, p xxxix

error, and despite repeated failure is able to reinvent himself over and over again. With similar determination, Gough is driven to retell the stories of her Aboriginal ancestry and to continue searching for moments of contact with that ancestry, while Ferran is compelled to seek out and expose those aspects of our history that have been overlooked and provide a small glimpse into uncharted lives.

The *Book of fish*, *Quintus Servinton*, and the work of Gough and Ferran merge the real with the imagined and invite us to question the links between truth, fate and history. With a determination to come to terms with the past, they present us with new narrative possibilities and thus new possibilities for transforming our conception of ourselves and our roles in history. In the search for meaning, we discover that the truth is mercurial. It is never fixed and is constantly open for reinvention.

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